

THOMAS MERTON'S CONTEMPLATIVE JOURNEY

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THE HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY of the birth of Thomas Merton took place on 31 January 2015. This is a time for remembering and reassessing the life of this great spiritual guide and, consciously or unconsciously, weighing his relevance for our own lives. We may do this to find something in his life to emulate. We may look to him for answers to our questions about prayer and the spiritual life. Or maybe it is just that we want to know more about a spiritual writer who left an enduring mark on twentieth-century religious thought.

Whatever our reasons, it is helpful to recall Merton's cautions about how one uses the life and words of others. Merton writes:

Many poets are not poets for the same reason that many religious men are not saints; they never succeed in being themselves They waste their years in vain efforts to be some other poet, some other saint¹

If we are to learn anything from Merton about his contemplative journey, we would do well to attend to his words by making our own paths. Each individual's journey is full of unique opportunities as well as detours, obstacles, dead ends and roads not taken. Merton himself lived by that conviction.

The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer once wrote that 'the first forty years of life furnish the text, while the remaining thirty supply the commentary'.² This may be a useful framework within which to look at Merton's life journey. The first forty years include the period from his

¹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 2007 [1961]), 98.

² Arthur Schopenhauer, 'The Ages of Life', in *Parerga and Paralipomena: A Collection of Philosophical Essays*, translated by T. Bailey Saunders (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 115.

early family life and education to his entry into the Trappist monastery at Gethsemani in Kentucky and his clear emergence as a writer. At the end of his formative years, it seemed that he had completed the main part of his journey. But after his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he entered into a new, expansive phase of that journey.³ He became a modern intellectual and spiritual explorer without leaving home.

By examining the later periods in Merton's life we can observe how his inward journey became an arena for dealing with challenges and conflicts, paradoxes and the fulfilment of potential only hinted at earlier. He who had left the world for the monastery 'returned' to the world, metaphorically, in a continuing dialogue about literature, culture, social problems and other religions. The themes that dominated his thought provoke others to discover their own questions.

Merton's Formative Years

Many young people today find travel, movement and change to be characteristic of their lives. Unlike their parents or grandparents, they do not live in the same place for most or all of their lives. They do not keep the same job until they retire. They count new experiences and exposure to different cultures and ideas as part of the essence of life. In that respect Merton was ahead of his time. His formative years were full of the stuff that is characteristic of a later age.

Merton was born in France of artist parents who were constant travellers; his father was a New Zealander and his mother from the USA. When he was six, his mother died. His family protected him from exposure to her ill health and the dying process. Though his mother wrote a letter to him in her last days, he never had an opportunity for any kind of farewell, even at her funeral. In some ways this aborted relationship with his mother stayed with him throughout his life.

His early education was sporadic, as his father moved around, taking Merton to several countries including the United States. Along the way he studied at various different boarding schools, and he was attending Oakham, in England, when his father died. The year before, Merton's grandfather had explained that he was providing financial support for the rest of the young man's school years, including college for him and his younger brother in the United States. Since his grandfather lived in

³ See Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1976 [1948]).

the US, Tom Bennett, his godfather and guardian in England, oversaw his well-being after his father died. During this time Merton travelled on his own in Europe and discovered a spark of religious feeling, even the seeds of a vocation. But he was still sowing his wild oats.

He began studying at Cambridge, but his guardian advised him to continue his education in the United States. It was at this point that Tom Bennett learnt that Merton had fathered a child with a young woman in England. Legal and financial arrangements were made for the mother and son, but Merton never saw them again. Little is said about this affair in his autobiography, but it came up as an impediment when he tried to pursue his vocation with the Franciscans.

In the United States, Merton enrolled at Columbia University in New York, where he made some lifelong friends, among them Bob Lax and Ed Rice. He was strongly influenced by several of his professors, especially Mark Van Doren and Dan Walsh. He and a few of his closest friends used a cabin that one of their families had in the hills overlooking Olean, New York. During these years his faith was growing, and in 1938 he became a Roman Catholic.

As time went on it became clearer to Merton that he would like to be a priest. He discussed his desire with Dan Walsh and concluded that he wanted to become a Franciscan. After speaking with a Franciscan in New York, he learnt that he could probably enter the novitiate in August 1940, ten months later. Early in June he spent some time at St Bonaventure University and there began to feel that he should reveal more of his past to Father Edmund, his Franciscan contact in New York. The friar told him he should withdraw his application to join the Franciscans since what he revealed posed an impediment. He was distressed by the rejection, but managed to get a job teaching English at Bonaventure. There he settled down into a life of prayer and teaching, though his desire for the priesthood remained.

In 1941 Merton decided to make a retreat at the monastery of Gethsemani. The silence and simplicity of the life appealed to him. After a second visit later in the year, he decided to apply and was accepted. Merton was ordained in 1948. It was during the time before this that he began to write *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which became a best-seller. Thus the first major phase of Merton's life journey came to its culmination in embracing a life of silence and contemplation. If he had simply disappeared into the solitude, as we might expect of a cloistered monk, many would feel that his life had been fulfilled. Yet new horizons opened

up even as he stayed in the same place geographically, and he began trying to understand more thoroughly who he was. In the early years of his monastic life, as is evident from *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the world outside the monastery represented a superficial existence. It was a place where temptations and distractions too easily led a person to live under the influence of a false self. That vision was no small part of what led Merton into the monastic life. He shunned the world for a rarefied atmosphere where he could concentrate on what seemed to be truly spiritual. He did not anticipate that his future experience would bring him into a different understanding of the world and his place in it.

The Inward Journey—Journeying in Place

Merton received a great deal of correspondence as a result of the success of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. As he received feedback and responded to it, he was stimulated into new ways of thinking. Correspondents would often suggest readings and Merton, a voracious reader, would be led into new territory. At the same time he initiated his own correspondence, especially as the range of his reading grew. He reached out to poets, other writers, activists, popes, Jews, Muslims and Zen practitioners to mention only a few. His correspondence was prolific, including 3,500 letters to over 1,000 correspondents. These letters reveal more about him than his publications alone.

In the mid-1950s Merton began to lose some of his idealized view of monasticism as a safe haven from the world and was rethinking his place in that world. He was already moving away from his earlier negative approach to the outside. One event stands out. In 1958, at a street corner in Louisville, Merton had a life-altering experience that shifted the way he approached his vocation and other human beings. Instead of seeing the world as something to be shunned and those outside the monastery as somehow out of touch with real spirituality, he saw the world as one and its people as his brothers and sisters who bore the light of God for him. During the last ten years of his life his prayer, writing and correspondence brought forth new fruit because he accepted responsibility for addressing the problems of his age and for coming to a new maturity of faith.

In *New Seeds of Contemplation* he criticized his earlier attitude, indicating that his thoughts in his 1949 book *Seeds of Contemplation* were written from a place of isolation, without real knowledge of the struggles of those outside the monastery. *New Seeds*, published in 1961, was not intended simply for those in religious life or for Catholics. It can even



Thomas Merton

be read by those who have no religious affiliation but seek a greater understanding of contemplative prayer. His experience at that corner in Louisville spilled over into a wider vision in several areas of his life.

Other works, such as *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and *Contemplation in a World of Action*, continued to flesh out his new attitude towards the world.⁴ They show a new perspective on a monk's need to be informed and responsive to problems in society. In them he clearly accepted responsibility for caring what happened in the larger world. That led him to write about contemporary problems such as nuclear weapons, violence and racism. Instead of seeing his role as mainly one of praying for the world, he saw it as one of grappling with issues and becoming a social critic.

Some of the evolution of his thought is chronicled in the first volume of his letters, edited by William H. Shannon. *The Hidden Ground of Love* includes correspondence primarily concerned with issues of social justice and religious experience.⁵ Merton was spontaneous and open in his correspondence, especially with trusted confidants. These exchanges allow us to see the ferment taking place in his life. To Daniel Berrigan he wrote

⁴ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image, 1968); *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame, In: U. of Notre Dame P, 1998 [1969]).

⁵ *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985).

of his frustration with the censorship he encountered, as a Trappist, when his writings on war were criticized by Church authorities as subversive and too unsettling for the ordinary Catholic. He struggled with what he saw as the passivity of Christians when writing to Dorothy Day as well as to Berrigan.

When writing to religious thinkers he revealed his growing interest in Zen Buddhism, Sufism and mystical aspects of Judaism as well as other denominations of Christianity. Throughout this period the reader can see Merton's religious horizons expanding, although he remained a committed Catholic. While he became more aware and critical of certain aspects of the monastic life and the Church, he insisted that his heart remained there and he had no desire to leave.

Of course, there are many more letters than appear in the first volume. His concern with social issues also makes itself known in publications such as *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, but Merton had to be careful about what he tried to get into print because the authorities in his community felt that certain topics were not appropriate for a cloistered monk. Merton sometimes found ways to get around these limits by circulating his ideas informally through friends or by getting others to plead his case with the authorities.

He was also concerned with the way his monastery was being run. He felt there was too much emphasis on rules to the detriment of the spirit. A particular complaint was about the way the manual work of the monastery was becoming mechanized. One problem with using tractors and other equipment was how they destroyed the tranquillity needed for contemplation. Another problem was what Merton saw as an excessive busyness. He felt the days of the monks were over-scheduled and there was not enough time for contemplation. He observed that there were very few real contemplatives in the monastery. The disregard for other people's feelings and opinions evident in these complaints did not endear him to his fellow monks.

A similar lack of sensitivity was evident in a relationship he developed with a nurse who took care of him while he was in hospital undergoing an operation. While we do not have direct access to correspondence between them, Michael Mott treats the subject extensively in his biography of Merton.⁶ The relationship lasted only from March 1966 to August the

⁶ Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (New York: Harvest, 1993).

same year, but it caused considerable concern among friends and those in the monastery who knew of it.

Thus Merton's continuing journey opened up new possibilities for spiritual growth, though he did not always handle them in what might be thought an ideal way. Indeed he struggled with that very notion of the ideal. He was the first to admit that he did not fit an idealized image of a monk, and even insisted that holding on to such an ideal was itself an obstacle. He resisted what he felt was a stereotyped view of monks, held by many, sensing that he might be caught up in it himself. He was concerned enough with this issue to devote some of his later writings to probing the meaning of authenticity and integrity before God.

In an exchange of letters with the feminist theologian Rosemary Reuther, Merton wrote: 'I don't comfortably wear the label of monk either, because I am now convinced that the first way to be a decent monk is to be a non-monk and an anti-monk, as far as the "image" goes'.⁷ Merton asked her for reading suggestions and confided in her about areas of monastic life that he felt needed to be rethought. But he insisted that he belonged in that life and intended to remain there. The correspondence with Reuther, as well as communications with his literary agent, Naomi Burton, gives us an opportunity to see how he grappled with self-knowledge, testing who he was before God. The fruit of this struggle was a new vision of faith and a new understanding of his role as a monk. Letters written after Vatican II, which are included at the end of a posthumous collection of writings, *The Monastic Journey*, reveal how Merton's own faith was being transformed by his greater empathy for the struggles of fellow travellers in faith.⁸

**Testing who
he was
before God**

In a message to the Synod of Bishops in Rome of October 1967, he wrote that the contemplative life is simply the Christian life lived in conditions that favour the 'experience of God', and that the desert experience of the contemplative life should make the monk sensitive to the struggles of the atheist.⁹ Earlier, in August of that year, Merton had responded to Pope Paul VI's initial request that he write the message by protesting that he did not write 'officially' for all monks, and that

⁷ *Hidden Ground of Love*, 511.

⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, edited by Patrick Hart (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1992 [1977]).

⁹ A version of the message was published as 'The Contemplative and the Atheist', in *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 162–176, here 168.

monks were not to be seen as experts on the contemplative life. He admitted that when he first became a monk he was surer of ‘answers’. As he advanced into solitude he realised that he had only begun to discern the questions.¹⁰

Most importantly, he suggested that in his solitude he had become, ‘as it were an explorer for you, a searcher in realms which you are not able to visit’. He explained:

The contemplative is not the man who has fiery visions of the cherubim carrying God on their imagined chariot, but simply he who has risked his mind in the desert beyond language and beyond ideas where God is encountered in the nakedness of pure trust¹¹

The image of the explorer is interesting in the contrast it provides with that of the *seeker*. The seeker generally knows what he or she is looking for. The explorer cannot be sure what exploration will reveal. Late in his life Merton no longer seems to want clearer answers and certainty.

In addition to his published writings and letters, Merton kept voluminous journals all his life, many of which were not available for some time after his death. Michael Mott reports that Merton thought his best writing was in the journals and notebooks. He used them to test out his ideas, to explore relationships and to gain self-knowledge. They reveal, above all, a probing intellect and a willingness to revise his thinking and emotional responses as he gained more insight. This openness to disparate aspects of his world and himself was not always appreciated by those with whom he interacted. Merton was a complex person who became increasingly involved in a complex world, and his thought does not lend itself easily to summary. All the same, it is possible to identify some dominant themes, including prayer, the true and false self, and the experience of God.

The Journey in Thought

Prayer

Prayer of all kinds interested Merton, but he was somewhat hesitant in sharing his own way of praying with others. Despite this reluctance, he responded to an inquiry from the Sufi scholar Aziz Abdul by describing his daily routine at the hermitage. He retired about 7.30 p.m. and rose

¹⁰ See *Hidden Ground of Love*, 158–159.

¹¹ *Hidden Ground of Love*, 156, 158.

around 2.30 a.m. After rising he prayed part of the canonical office, then meditated for about an hour and a quarter. This was followed by Bible reading, then coffee and breakfast, after which he continued reading and studying until sunrise. At sunrise he said another part of the office, followed by manual labour until around 9.00 a.m., when he again prayed the office and maybe wrote a few letters. Then he said Mass, followed by a meal. After that he prayed another part of the office and gave an hour or so to meditation. Then he worked at his writing. Late in the afternoon he again prayed the office and had a light supper.¹²

Though he was reluctant to say much, he did relay something of his way of praying to his correspondent. His prayer was simply to centre attention on the presence of God without using an image: 'My prayer is then a kind of praise rising up out of the center of Nothing and Silence. If I am still present "myself" this I recognize as an obstacle about which I can do nothing unless He Himself removes the obstacle.'¹³ Clearly contemplation was integral to his spiritual life.

New Seeds of Contemplation reveals Merton's mature thought on the subject, his wariness of definitions and his insistence that it is easier to say what contemplation is not than what it is. He says at one point that contemplation is 'poor in concepts'.¹⁴ It is difficult to speak of except obliquely.

It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source. It knows the Source, obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes both beyond reason and beyond simple faith.¹⁵

Contemplation can only be hinted at, pointed to or symbolized. It cannot be taught or even explained. It cannot be described as prayerfulness or thinking about God. It can only be known through experience not through reasoning or concepts. As Merton describes the experience, 'a door opens in the center of our being and we seem to fall through it into immense depths'.¹⁶ God is the source of the activity in contemplative prayer, not ourselves. Self-consciousness fades away.

¹² *Hidden Ground of Love*, 63.

¹³ *Hidden Ground of Love*, 64.

¹⁴ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 5.

¹⁵ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 1.

¹⁶ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 227.

The Wider World

The development of Merton's view of contemplation away from the solitary and isolated atmosphere of the monastery drew him into greater communion with the wider world. Conversely, that communion led him into a more deeply contemplative life. His sense of connection played itself out in an acceptance of the responsibility to speak the truth in the face of racism, the violence of war and other issues of justice. He was aware of the danger of isolating himself from these things in the monastery, but found his own way to address them. He knew he was not called to march or give speeches but he could become well informed, write and try to live simply with a larger vision. If this presented a paradoxical view of the monk for some, so be it, but he felt that not to follow his prophetic path would make him complicit in the darker side of human history. It was a predominantly contemplative prayer life that made this connection.

The True Self

At the same time, Merton's view of contemplation, hinting at a growing trust in what lies beneath consciousness, led him more and more in the direction of distinguishing between the false self and the true self. The false self refers to the external self which works, thinks, observes and talks about itself, and which disguises the deeper, hidden self. For him, the false self is tied up with a superficial identity which relies excessively on the values of society or the influence of others. Merton says he came to the monastery 'in revolt against the meaningless confusion of a life in which there was so much activity, so much movement, so much useless talk, so much superficial and needless stimulation' that he could not remember who he was.¹⁷ But he continued to struggle against the false self as it related to images of the writer and the monk that he felt skewed his self-understanding and understanding of others.

A growing trust in what lies beneath consciousness

In his earlier life as a monk Merton seems to have undervalued the external self as if it had little to contribute to a person's identity. His attempts to clarify it sometimes seem one-sided and negative. When he began to work with novices and saw their lack of preparation for the spiritual life, he admitted that it was necessary to develop a healthy self

¹⁷ Merton, *Monastic Journey*, 220.

before a person could understand what it meant to forget it. He never really fleshed out the fully dimensions of being a self. Maybe that would have taken him too far afield into psychology, but it often leaves his reader with a lingering dualism. This area of his thinking remained a work in progress.

When he spoke of the true self, Merton's work on contemplation paid off, although aspects of it may still seem obscure. The true self is the hidden self, which cannot be analyzed like an object.

As long as there is an 'I' that is the definite subject of a contemplative experience, an 'I' that is aware of itself and of its contemplation ... we remain in the realm of multiplicity, activity, incompleteness, striving, and desire The true inner self ... is not the kind of subject that can amass experiences, reflect on them, reflect on himself, for this 'I' is not the superficial and empirical self that we know in our everyday life.¹⁸

For Merton, the everyday self assimilates the values of its environment and sees things as its possessions. It brings false identity. The true self finds its identity in God and relativises all that is less than God. It is difficult to grasp or even speak of. It does not have layers, like Freud's id, ego and super-ego. It is not the ideal self or the 'best' self. It is more a matter of orientation, which is not to be examined but rather provides the vantage point from which everything else is faced.

The true self is the ground of contemplation, the still point where the person is united with God and no longer operates out of an individualised ego. The only way to be aware of it is not to be aware of it, simply to experience a unity oblivious to personal identity. The true self lies beneath the level of consciousness but can surface at times when the external self comes to rest and lets God take over. As I have noted, Merton failed to reflect thoroughly on the relationship between the false self, the true self and the healthy ego that develops a responsible moral stance. Making such distinctions would have brought him into psychology and even theology, and he was not a systematic thinker. His primary purpose was to create for himself a view of the ground of integrity which would be incomprehensible unless it was rooted in God. He suggests that in his own life integrity and authenticity must be won again and again.

¹⁸ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 279.

For one who embraces a spiritual life, integrity and authenticity are paramount, but they are often forged in the midst of tensions that are not fully resolved. Merton provides a great example of such tensions and the ambiguities that accompany them. His later life makes evident how he lived with paradoxes. He sought a life of obscurity but became known internationally. He lived in the same place for almost thirty years but engaged with people and issues far more fully than his contemporaries who lived in the world. He withdrew to a hermitage and invited people to visit him there. He was committed to the life of a Trappist yet was critical of the way it was lived and found ways to circumvent the rules. Finally, he fell in love and let himself be swept along for a time without regard for the impact of his behaviour on others. When he finally faced his own shortcomings, he was ruthlessly honest, admitting he had been like a drunk, driving through red light after red light.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the relationship was a gift that set free the power of his heart to love and be loved as never before. Despite areas of contradiction and lack of insight, there are beacons of grace on every path.

The Experience of God

In speaking of God Merton relied on the language and images of traditional Catholic theology. He spoke of God, Christ and the Spirit as



Entrance to the garden of Gethsemani Abbey

¹⁹ Mott, *Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 439.

well as various aspects of his Christian heritage. But, especially later in his life as he had contact with a greater variety of religions and with non-religious people, he turned to the common denominator of the experience of God. He encountered Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists not by comparing beliefs and ideas but on the shared ground of transcendent experience.

Merton's exposure to religions other than Christianity, in particular Buddhism, confirmed the importance of cutting through concepts and words to the ineffability of God. In his own relationship with God, Merton sank more and more deeply into an *apophatic* approach, which does not place undue trust in words. Such an approach to God, unlike a *kataphatic* approach, which relies on words and images, fully accepts the limits of all language and images about God. Merton speaks continually of encountering God in the desert, where God is not approached by problem-solving or explanations but in 'the nakedness of pure trust'.

Images of the 'desert' from Hebrew and Christian scriptures and 'emptiness' from Buddhism reflect Merton's most existential language about the experience of God. This emphasis, along with St John of the Cross's 'Dark night of the soul', underlies the importance of not letting the presence of God, already complete in the individual, be obscured by efforts to grasp a concept of God. In this regard a contemplative can be sympathetic to an atheist, but with greater trust in what is hidden.

When he spoke of God in relation to atheists, Merton stood with them in the desert, sharing his conviction that love is the epiphany of God in our poverty. He does not try to argue anyone into belief:

The contemplative has nothing to tell you except to reassure you and say that if you dare to penetrate your own silence and dare to advance without fear into the solitude of your own heart, and risk the sharing of that solitude with the lonely other who seeks God through you and with you, then you will truly recover the light and the capacity to understand what is beyond words and beyond explanations.²⁰

Everyone's Journey

When we consider the whole range of Merton's journey, we find a life full of rich thought and experience: rich, too, in complexity and struggle. In Merton we see a good example of someone who embraced his contradictions

²⁰ Merton, 'A Letter on Contemplative Life', in *Monastic Journey*, 223.

as well as strengths. He reproached himself for not being more integrated but kept his sights on God, who embraced him so that he could embrace other flawed human beings.

His journey was his alone. His questions were uniquely his. What his life has to offer is an invitation to find our own path, to ask our own questions, to explore our own dark places. That is as good a legacy as anyone can desire.

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